

[St. Elmo W. Acosta]

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July 17, 1939.

St. Elmo W. Acosta

Former Jacksonville

City Commissioner, in

charge of Public Parks

133 East Bay-st.,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

ST. ELMO W. ACOSTA (Additional)

Mr. Acosta, interviewed on March 27, 1939, on Jacksonville history and his own life history, sent word that he believed he had omitted some important information in his previous interview, and asked the writer to call again that he might supply this data.

Mr. Acosta had made an appointment for 2 p.m. He had completed his round of wholesale deliveries of special brands of canned goods and "Lettuce Loaf Mayonnaise" to the local and suburban hotel trade. The little white, red-lettered truck, which he drives himself, his corpulent body leaving small space for a companion on the narrow seat, stood idle at the curb. The tall staff, with its iron windmill disc - "No Parking- Police Regulations"- had been

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removed from the yellow-painted restricted pavement front, and rested behind the front door until [?] time tomorrow morning xx 6 a. m. Business was over for the day.

A shipment of standard brand canned peas occupied the center of the store, while new shelves reaching to the ceiling lined the walls and were completely filled with other articles of merchandise he carries regularly in stock.

"Looks like business is pretty good," I vent[?]ured ventured .

"Well, yes, we have a much larger stock than when you were in the store in March. That forty cases of peas just arrived this morning. The canners notified me their goods would 2 be advanced in price after August 1st, as this has not been a good season for peas - drouth up the country, and they did not fill out - so that canners would not be putting up any new stock this year. I have a good trade on this particular brand, so I fell for their argument and stocked up with all I could afford.

"You know I completely forgot to tell you before that I was president of the South Jacksonville Association that annexed that suburb to the city of Jacksonville. That was an important post, as South Jacksonville was in the 'dumps' - so to speak - a heavy municipal debt, no commercial gas, old houses, poor streets, and many of the yellow-painted frame buildings of Florida East Coast employees, and a network of tracks used for the P. E. C. switching operations. There was considerable opposition from Jacksonville authorities and businessmen to taking us under their wing.

"But we talked, and we campaigned, and we finally made the 'powers that be' conscious of the advantages of including us in the Greater Jacksonville plan. Now look at the south side - beautiful homes line the riverfront, with well-kept estates around the bends of the St. Johns, a well-paved road to the Jacksonville Beach section, so much traveled that now there is another road under construction shortening the distance to the ocean - Beach Boulevard, traversing the old Hogan Road right-of-way, to relieve traffic congestion. The improving of the old farms and plantations which have been laid out into 3 city lots on

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which have been build magnificent modern homes - it is really almost unbelievable what has been accomplished on the south side of the river in the past ten years, unless you have lived there and seen it grow, like I have.

“While I was a member of the Jacksonville City Commission, I was the first one to advocate the use of voting machines to combat illegal and corrupt voting practices, and actually brought the first voting machine to Jacksonville.

“Another thing, I tried for years to put an efficiency man into the city government, a man who would get from department to department, studying operations, and presenting his recommendations for improvement or economy in administration of its affairs, so that things would be on an efficiency basis.

“I tried for eight years - through two governors' administrations - to establish a State school for police officers, taking boys sixteen years of age or older, who wished to become policemen, giving them special and intensive training for this work. I wished to have the school attached to the penal institution at Raiford, where they could observe criminals first-hand. The course, as I planned it, would cover a period of six years. If it was anticipated that Jacksonville would require ten additional policemen, then we would take ten young men from Jacksonville and train them so that at the end of six years they would be efficient law-enforcing officers, instead of receiving appointments on short notice on account of family connection with some city official or by political preferment; if Baldwin needed one, then we would take one from that section, and so on throughout the State, a new class starting each year. It 4 would have developed into a strong, efficient, State-wide system of intelligent police protection that would have been of untold benefit to the citizens of Florida in economy and protection.

“I tried also to [?] influence two governors to insist on three sessions a day from the beginning of our State Legislature convening every two years. They have three sessions at the end when bills have accumulated and there is a rush of work when everybody is tired,

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and it is impossible to accomplish anything intelligently. It would probably have saved the tax-payers a lot of money, too, and done away forever with the extra session idea. The 1939 session of the Florida Legislature was a farce - they accomplished nothing, but spent about a half million dollars of the tax-payers' money, putting all city officials and public employes on a pension basis after more or less [?]or[?]ife.

“Another thing I advocated as a protection to the residents of Jacksonville and other large cities, was the appointment by the Governor of Florida of six under-cover men known only to him. These men would work in connection with the Federal Board of Investigation, getting the names of dangerous criminals, murderers, etc., at large or headed for Florida. They would simply locate these desperadoes and communicate with the Governor who would notify the sheriff of the section or county where the criminal had been located, and he would be turned up on short notice, while the informant would remain unknown.

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“As Park commissioner, I was the first to advocate the purchase of a park for the [Brontweed?] section - 27 acres - which later materialised and has developed into a fine city park.

“As a drive showing the beauties of Duval County, I wanted the county to buy a 100 feet strip all the way around the county, taking in the beaches, leaving a sixty foot driveway in the center and beautifying twenty feet on each side of the roadway with different kinds of evergreens and flowering shrubs, and other native plants. I also wanted to establish a wide driveway from the old seaport - Mayport - to Jacksonville. This is a beautiful drive.

“I was the first to take mistletoe out of the trees in the city and suburbs, on account of the killing of one man by this parasite.

“Also started a campaign against mites in rockeries, as they sometimes cause fires.

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"I wanted the city to provide a fund of \$100,00 for comfort stations at convenient locations - I was successful in getting one or two in public parks, but the politicians killed the measure, as well as another appropriation I asked for - a fund of \$100,000 to spend for entertainment and amusement of the tourists who came to Jacksonville, and if proper co-operation was offered would spend considerably more than that amount annually. Now, they go to south Florida and other 6 and other sections where definite improvements are made to the 'stranger within our gates'.

"I advocated the county taking over the [Hecksher?] Drive and making it a toll-free road to the Eastport section. I also wanted to establish a ferry from St. George to Mayport, [connecting?] up with the [Hecksher?] road, which would have made another beautiful circle-drive to the beach and return.

"I advocated the city acquiring the [?] right-of-way roadbed, and making a road 150 feet wide from South Jacksonville to the beaches.

"I advocated a city-owned two hundred feet circle in the retail section in San Marco Blvd. in South Jacksonville, so that people might park their cars and shop without police interference or danger of their cars being damaged by rushing traffic in that section."

At this time a woman passing the store, stepped in to inquire the name of a plant of unusual beauty on a table by the front door.

"That s a sage palm, Ma'am," explained Mr. Acosta. "I planted the seed in the tub last December, and it has just come up. Here are some of the seed," he said, taking up a handful of hard yellow pods from a pasteboard carton, bearing a sign, "three for 10cts."

"The sage is one of our most beautiful palms. It takes the seed six months to germinate, but the plant grows very slowly, putting out only seven of these feathery fronds a year. A sage [?] thirty years old would be about [?] eight feet tall. The cold does not hurt this species,

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and it grows outside as well as in greenhouses. They bloom in the fall of the year and the 7 seed mature in December and January.

"It is quite a sight to see the [?] spiders which infest these palms. They spin their web during the day, like a small wheel, and then eat it up and spin another the next day. The viscid thread they spin is part of their necessary diet. They are very formidable also, when they attract a flying roach to their web, and feast on him, making a spread as [large?] as a small saucer, with their big bodies, their [long?] legs [and?] the reach."

The visitor took three of the yellow seeds, and after receiving some instructions as to their planting and the preparation of the soil for the pet in which she [?] to start the growth, went out after profusely thanking Mr. Acosta for his trouble.

"Well, to get back to our story," said Mr. Acosta, "I forgot in my other interview to say I was the first one to advocate that Duval County purchase a part of the old Road Pearson tract adjoining Camp Foster - 380 acres, to be exact - comprising the site of the old camp hospital during the World War. It could have been bought for \$80,000. I went myself to public spirited citizens and secured \$1[6?],000 in donations, so that the city would have had to spend only \$64,000. The city council would not approve the plan, and it lost by a tie vote. The government had already spent about \$200,000 on the site in improvements of different sorts.

"Now that Camp Foster has become the site of the recently [apportioned?] Governments Air Base for the use of the Navy, if Jacksonville had taken my plan through twenty years ago, now 8 they could have cashed in on their investment, as that property is in demand.

"Do I remember an A. D. Barnett in the history of Jacksonville? No, there was old man [W?]. B. Barnett, and his sons, B. H. and Marlow.

"There was an Arthur D. Barnett, however, connected with the firm of Ambler, [Stockton?] and Barnett, that operated a bank in the early 1880's where the consolidated building now

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stands. Barnett was a New York man, was quite smart, and had a responsible position with the firm. I believe he later went into business for himself as a kind of business broker; he was a lawyer, also, and handled A. M. Reed's affairs.

"The Barnett Bank was first established on the corner where [Furchgett's?] store now is. Mr. W. B. Barnett died long years ago. The bank was started in this location in 1877.

"No, I never knew any Henry M. Stanley, a newspaper reporter, of Jacksonville. There may have been a Stanley, but it was not the famous Henry M. Stanley, the Englishman, who was sent after Dr. Livingston, the explorer in South Africa, who wrote the famous 'In Darkest Africa' published in the 1880's.

"You know, people of Jacksonville have forgotten about things that old "Chic" (his nickname) have done for them, and I have been thinging as a means of attracting attention to my wholesale grocery business, to run little advertisements in the reading columns of the daily newspapers like, 'st. Elmo W. Acosta, as Park Commissioner, first advocated purchase of 9 voting machines. ****Buy Lettuce Leaf Mayonnaise. ' Or 'st. Elmo W. Acosta originated a plan in 1925 to train police of the State of Florida, giving them a six-year period in a State owned Police School. Buy Lettice Leaf Mayonnaise.'

"Politics have become so corrupt in Florida, and especially in Jacksonville which is practically machine-owned by crooked politicians, that I have no desire for further service in this connection. I neglected my own business to such as extent while I was in politics that it has gone down to nothing, and my only desire now is to build up my grocery business until I can make a living at least, and pay my taxes. I sold one house this last month, which helped me considerably, as the tenant owed me \$500, rent, with no possibility of collection. But I had to sell it to get him out, which gave me a nice down payment and an income of \$0. per month for ten years. Of course, I may have to take it back, if things do not break right for the new owner, but at least I paid a juicy tax assessment on another piece of property this morning, together with \$20.00 interest. If I

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can, I am going to keep on selling until I cut down my holdings, and just keep my estate on the river on the south side, where I hope to die in peace if the roof don't fall in on me."